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ABSTRACT

This guide assists individuals with disabilities to understand vocational rehabilitation (VR) services available to postsecondary students. Presented in a question-and-answer format, the guide covers the following topics: purpose of vocational rehabilitation, eligibility of postsecondary students, implications of geographical relocation, attendance at out-of-state programs, variations in financial support among states, the appeal process, VR eligibility criteria and postsecondary programs, the application process, locating the local VR office, development of the Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan, medical examination requirements, services provided by the VR program, coordination between the VR program and the high school/college transition program, college services provided by the VR program, payment for VR services, sources of additional financial aid, limitations on VR services for students desiring graduate or second bachelor's degrees, independent living services, and termination of postsecondary rehabilitation services. (DB)

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Vocational Rehabilitation Services: A Consumer Guide for Postsecondary Students

Postsecondary education, whether it is college, adult and continuing education, or technical preparation, plays a major role in preparing individuals for employment and career opportunities. This is especially critical because most jobs now require skills taught at the postsecondary level. Students who continue their education after high school maximize their preparedness for careers in today's changing economy as they are taught the higher order thinking and technical skills necessary to take advantage of employment opportunities.

Individuals with disabilities need to consider their options and opportunities in postsecondary education as they plan for employment and independence. The vocational rehabilitation program is one of a number of programs that can offer assistance. Whether you are a high school student with a disability making plans for postsecondary education, a current postsecondary student, an adult who recently acquired a disability, or a parent, advocate, or professional advisor, you may have questions about vocational rehabilitation services. This guide presents key information about vocational rehabilitation services and summarizes the implications for postsecondary students. The HEATH Resource Center staff have designed the guide to help you understand the services these programs provide, and to assist you in making informed choices.

What is vocational rehabilitation?

Vocational rehabilitation, often referred to as VR, was established through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehab Act) and is funded at the federal and state level. Each state has a VR program.

The purpose of this act is to empower individuals with disabilities to maximize their employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and inclusion and integration into society. This is accomplished by participation in programs that develop the skills and, more importantly, the supports that they need to obtain and maintain employment. A vocational rehabilitation counselor facilitates this process. Together, you clarify career choices and identify the supports, accommodations, and employment skills that are needed.

The Rehab Act also describes independent living services. These services include peer counseling, independent living skills, training, information and referral services, and individual and systems advocacy. These services can be helpful to you during your postsecondary education program.

Can an individual with a disability who is enrolled in postsecondary education receive rehabilitation services?

Yes, if you are determined to be eligible. Participation in the VR program is voluntary, and is based on *eligibility* not *entitlement.* This means that you must apply for services and meet the criteria for eligibility, which are determined on a case-by-case basis. You are not automatically eligible for VR services just because you have a disability.

The Rehab Act states that a person is eligible for VR services if the individual

- has a disability;
- can benefit in terms of achieving an employment outcome; and
- requires vocational rehabilitation services to prepare for, enter, engage in, or retain gainful employment.

The rehabilitation program must determine your eligibility within 60 days of application, unless there are exceptional circumstances. If this is the case, an extended evaluation may be needed to determine if you could benefit from services in terms of an employment outcome. The extended evaluation will end whenever an eligibility decision is made.

Eligibility is determined without regard to age, race, gender, disability, color, creed, marital status,

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national origin, or sexual orientation.

What if I move to another state?

Each state has a VR agency. (In some states, there is a separate agency for individuals who are blind.) You should contact the local VR agency in the state in which you are presently residing, and it will facilitate the transfer of important records and documents from your current VR agency to a VR agency in the area to which you are moving.

A state may not impose any prior residential requirements as a condition of eligibility.

What if the program I want is in another state?

Generally, VR agencies have a written policy covering this situation. In many instances, out-of-state postsecondary education is permitted, but financial assistance through the VR agency is limited to rates equal to that of in-state tuition and fees unless there is a unique circumstance for the selection of a particular out-of-state institution.

Why do some states pay more than others?

Under federal law, each individual VR agency must establish fees that are "reasonable and fair." What is determined to be "reasonable and fair" varies.

What if I disagree with the VR's determination?

If you are not eligible for services, you must be notified in writing of this decision, the basis for it, your right to appeal, and the process for doing so.

If the VR agency makes a decision or takes an action with which you disagree, you have the right to appeal that action. To initiate that appeal, you should write to the director of the state VR agency to identify the reason(s) for the appeal and the action you wish the agency to take. In addition, each state has a Client Assistance Program (CAP), which can provide you with advice and assistance in resolving issues and concerns. In most instances, an individual's issue or concern is addressed without having to conduct a formal appeal hearing.

How do VR eligibility criteria apply to postsecondary education?

If the postsecondary education program is necessary for you to obtain your employment goal, and you are qualified to meet the program's admission requirements, VR services may be necessary in order for you to participate in and complete the program. Remember, if your disability creates a problem in obtaining or maintaining a job, you may be eligible for VR services.

What do I have to do to apply for and receive VR services?

You must submit a formal application to begin the process. Contact your local VR agency to obtain a copy of the application. Once you complete and sign the application, a vocational rehabilitation counselor who serves the area in which you live and/or who specializes in your disability will be selected to work with you.

To the fullest extent possible, the VR counselors will use existing information to determine your eligibility and begin planning for services. Pertinent information such as school records and transcripts, transition services information from an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), medical records, information about your disability, work history, military records, and perhaps Social Security data will be useful to your counselor. If you have this information, include it with your application as this information will help expedite the application process. Your counselor may ask you to sign a release so that some information can be requested directly from the source.

How can I find the local VR office?

All states, territories, and trust areas have a vocational rehabilitation agency. In some states, there are two agencies: a general agency and one for persons who are legally blind. In other states, there is one agency to serve all individuals with disabilities.

Each state agency has a central or administration office, usually in the state capital, and district offices located throughout the state. To find the VR office in your area:

- look under the state government listings in the telephone book;
- check with your local library or health and human services office;
- ask the coordinator of disability support services or the person responsible for ADA and Section 504 compliance at your institution;
- call your local Independent Living Center;
- ask your high school guidance counselor or transition services specialist; or
- request a "State Agencies List" from the National Rehabilitation Information Center, NARIC, 8455 Colesville Road, Suite 935, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Phone: (800) 346-2742 (V/TTY). In Maryland, call (301) 588-9284 (V/TTY).

How do I develop my rehabilitation plan?

When it is determined that you are eligible for services, you and your VR counselor will develop an Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP) to specify your em-

ployment goal and the services that will be provided to help you reach that goal.

The IWRP will outline clearly the long-term goals, intermediate objectives, and services you will receive to meet the objectives. After you and your VR counselor have agreed upon and signed the IWRP, you will receive a copy for your records. Amendments to the original IWRP can be made as your needs or circumstances change.

As a postsecondary education student eligible for and receiving VR services, you should meet with your VR counselor regularly to ensure that your VR program is proceeding as planned. You have the responsibility to meet deadlines and keep your VR counselor informed of school requirements, due dates, and your progress toward your academic and vocational goals. You and your VR counselor should discuss and determine how often you should meet to review your progress.

Will I need to have a medical examination?

VR agencies often require medical information to determine eligibility for services. Under federal law, the VR agency will utilize existing medical records and information you provide regarding the nature of your disability, interests, abilities, and related factors. In instances in which the existing information is not available or is insufficient, the VR agency will ask you to have a medical or specialist examination, which will be paid for by the agency.

What services does the VR program provide?

The services provided by VR include assessment for career planning; vocational guidance and counseling; vocational and other training; medical rehabilitation services; rehabilitation technology; orientation and mobility training for persons who are blind; and on-the-job or other personal assistance services. Aside from specific services, the VR counselor can assist you in coordinating and accessing the services you need, some of which may be available through your postsecondary institution's disability services program, other agencies or community programs, or through VR.

Not every state can provide services to all individuals who meet the eligibility criteria. The Rehab Act requires states with limited resources to establish an order of selection to determine which individuals will be served. Priority is given to individuals with the most severe disabilities. The definition of "most severely disabled" is based on criteria established by each state.

What if I am planning to go to college after high school?

The VR program works with many high school students with disabilities to assist in planning and providing transition services. Transition services are a coordinated set of activities designed to promote movement from school to career activities. This may include the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Your Individualized Education Plan (IEP), if you are receiving special education services, or your guidance plan, should include transition services. Some of these services may be provided by VR before you finish high school. Ask your teacher, guidance counselor, or transition specialist about coordinating with adult agencies as you plan for the transition to college.

If I am going to college, will the VR program assist with services?

Yes. If you are eligible for services, the VR counselor can help you develop an individualized program that considers not only the type of college training needed, but also the expected employment outcome. You and your counselor will consider many factors, including referral to the coordinator of services for students with disabilities, your abilities and limitations, availability of needed support services from college, the feasibility of the length and type of training required to reach your employment goal, and your financial resources. Because the college services provided by VR vary from state to state, you should ask about the college policy in your state.

Who pays for VR services?

Some of the VR services, such as guidance and career counseling, may be available at no cost to you. Other services may be based on financial need. If you are eligible for VR services, you may be asked to provide information concerning your income and expenses. This information is necessary so the counselor can determine if you should have responsibility in paying for some or all of your rehabilitation program. The counselor will explain these arrangements fully before you begin a rehabilitation program.

Federal regulations require that other financial aid funding (i.e., Pell Grants, local state grants, loans) be used to meet education costs before VR financial assistance can be considered. For more information regarding student financial aid, contact the financial aid office or the office of disability support services at the institution you are interested in attending. You also may ask your VR counselor for guidance.

In some cases, Social Security Work Incentives may be available to support your vocational goal. This option should be researched with your counselor or another advocate.

Is it the postsecondary institution's or VR's responsibility to pay for additional services?

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it is the responsibility of the postsecondary institution to ensure that its programs are accessible to persons with disabilities. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the institution to provide auxiliary aids and services, including interpreters, if a student with a disability requires an accommodation to access campus programs. Only in instances of extreme hardship can an institution not be required to provide those services. In a number of instances, state VR agencies and postsecondary institutions have "cooperative agreements" that specify roles and responsibilities in this and other areas of collaboration. The college is not required to provide aids or services for personal use or study.

What if VR doesn't cover all my expenses?

In all likelihood, VR will not be able to cover all your expenses related to postsecondary education, so it is important that you contact the financial aid office at the college or university you will be attending. Federal regulations require that other financial aid funding such as Pell Grants, state grants, and student loans be used to meet your educational expenses. In addition, you should research other sources of financial aid through reference books at your local library.

What if I want to get a graduate degree or a second bachelor's degree?

The federal law governing the VR program establishes one of the eligibility criteria as "requiring" VR services to prepare for, enter, engage in, or retain employment. Therefore, eligibility and services are provided when *required* for an employment outcome. If an individual is seeking a graduate degree or second bachelor's degree for *career development* purposes, the VR agency will not be able to assist financially.

What about independent living services?

Independent living services are provided through Independent Living Centers. The centers are not-for-profit, community-based, non-residential programs designed to promote independent living for persons with disabilities. They offer community service programs and are directed and staffed by people who either have a disability or have expertise with a broad cross-section of disabilities.

All Independent Living Centers provide a set of core services, including peer counseling, independent living skills training, information and referral services, and individual and systems advocacy. The centers assist individuals with disabilities, as well as the families of those individuals.

When will I stop receiving the rehabilitation services that are provided during my postsecondary education program?

You will receive services and assistance until you are successfully working, or until a determination is made that you cannot achieve a vocational rehabilitation goal. Your VR counselor will work with you and the placement office at your postsecondary education program to assist you in finding suitable employment. It is important that you keep in touch with your VR counselor as you get close to completing the program so you can make an informed choice about which employment option is the best for you.

When it is determined that you have been satisfactorily employed for at least 60 days, your VR counselor will begin the closure process with you. This can occur quickly. The process takes into consideration the need for post-employment services. If it appears that your job situation is stable, your file will be closed.

We encourage you to begin the process of applying for vocational rehabilitation and to participate actively in the VR process. If you have further questions, please contact:

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